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Neither a Borrower nor a Lender be: Linguistic Mercantilism **in Renaissance France**

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Abstract:

This essay explores the extent to which the distinctive figurative language used by linguistic purists in 16th-century France is underpinned by what might be termed a mercantilist conception of linguistic exchange during the period of early capitalism. For purists such as the Huguenot humanist and hellenist Henri Estienne (1531-98), who wrote a series of vernacular texts between 1565 and 1579 denouncing the putative Italian influence on the French language, linguistic exchange in the form of lexical borrowing from Italian into French is seen as a threat to the linguistic balance of payments of the nation. For Estienne, the free exchange of linguistic material in the form of borrowed words is just as pernicious as unregulated economic exchange between France and Italy, which French public opinion perceived as highly damaging to French interests and, ultimately, the wealth and well-being of the French people. This essay explores the everyday experience of the French readers of Estienne's works with specific reference to their often hostile attitude towards expatriate Italian bankers and financiers, and examines how Estienne seeks to appeal, through a series of carefully chosen metaphors of economic exchange, to such 'common ground' knowledge.

1. Introduction

While Polonius' words to Laertes can hardly be stretched to constitute a comment on the contemporary state of the English language, the advice that they contain ('For loan oft loses both itself and friend, And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry'; Shakespeare, 1998, Act I, Scene 3) seems apposite as a description of the particular concerns of those who sought, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to limit or, indeed, halt and turn back the flow of foreign loanwords into their national language. Such early linguistic purism was by no means restricted to France, and the distinctive forms of polemical language that characterise it crossed cultural boundaries with disarming ease, especially given the fact that they were frequently used to castigate borrowing from the very language from which they had themselves been borrowed. Two more quotations from contemporary English writers will set the tone for my discussion:

I am of this opinion that our own tung shold be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borowing of other tungen, wherein if we take not heed by tijm, ever borowing and never payeng, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt. For then doth our tung naturallie and praisablie utter her meaning, when she bouroweth no counterfeitnes of other tungen to attire her self withall, but useth plainlie her own [...]. (Sir John Cheke, letter to Sir Thomas Hoby prefaced to Hoby's translation of *The Courtier* (1561); cited in Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 217)

Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any straunge ynkehorne termes, but to speake as is commonly received: neither seeking to be over fine, nor yet living over-carelesse, using our speeche as most men doe, and ordering our wittes as the fewest have done. Some seeke so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language. And I dare sweare this, if some of their mothers were alive, thei were not able to tell what they say: and yet these fine English clerkes will say, they speake in their mother tongue, if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the Kings English. (Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), ‘Plainnesse, what it is’; cited in Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 218)

We meet here (and not for the last time) the distinctive language of the early purist and, in particular, some of the metaphors that become commonplace in discussions of language contact and influence: cleanliness, purity, integrity and wholeness, along with a characteristic emphasis on metaphors of – dysfunctional – economic exchange. For John Cheke, continued borrowing of foreign terms without repayment will result in linguistic bankruptcy, and the act of borrowing itself entails a disfigurement of the language that is akin to counterfeiting. Wilson, in his own contribution to the notorious ‘inkhorn’ controversy (primarily, but not exclusively, concerned with borrowing from Latin), denounces those that seek out ‘outlandish’ (i.e. foreign) words as counterfeiters of the King’s English. While these metaphors may raise a smile today, their ‘entailments’ (or logical consequences; see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 157-58; Kövecses, 2002, pp. 93-105) are more serious, and betray the undercurrent of xenophobic hostility that characterises much early purism. Early modern monarchs reserved cruel and unusual punishment for counterfeiters, whose activities were

perceived to undermine the integrity of the country's currency (whose devaluation was, of course, the frequently exercised privilege of the monarch); the actions of linguistic counterfeiters, Wilson suggests, represent an analogous act of *lèse majesté*. My intention in this essay is to explore this link between linguistic borrowing, economic exchange and political threat in the context of French linguistic purism of the later sixteenth century, and, in particular, in the work of the celebrated humanist and Hellenist, compiler of the monumental *Thesaurus linguae graecae* of 1572, Henri Estienne (1531-98), who devoted a series of works in the vernacular between 1565 and 1579 to a virulent denunciation of what he saw as the corrupting influence of the Italian language on French (Estienne 1853, 1896, 1972; Clément, 1898). What I wish to suggest is that, for Estienne, the free exchange of linguistic material in the form of borrowed words is just as pernicious as unregulated economic exchange between France and Italy, which French public opinion perceived as highly damaging to French interests and, ultimately, the wealth and well-being of the French people. It has been said of Estienne that he was an “unrequited political theorist” (Hope, 1971, p. 231): it is clear that his status as a Huguenot coloured his view of the influence of Italian Catholics, chief among them the Queen Mother Catherine de Medici, at the French royal court; what I want to explore here is the extent to which he might also be claimed to be a mercantilist *avant la lettre*.

2. Linguistic purism in the early modern period

Before going any further, however, I need to give a clearer account of early modern linguistic purism. For George Thomas, writing in 1991, linguistic purism is:

the manifestation of a desire on the part of a speech community (or some section of it) to preserve a language from, or rid it of, putative foreign elements or other elements held to be undesirable [...]. It may be directed at all linguistic levels but primarily the lexicon. Above all, purism is an aspect of the codification, cultivation and planning of standard languages. (Thomas, 1991, p. 12)

A striking feature of the history of purism is the recurrence of a limited stock of metaphorical models to characterise the process of borrowing (itself a metaphorical model, of course) and those that practise and oppose it, both across cultures and over time. Purists in the early modern period style themselves as *millers* (separating the husk from the wheat), *gardeners* (cultivating fruit-bearing trees and pulling up weeds), *metallurgists* (recovering metals from their ore and removing impurities), *doctors* (removing diseased portions of the body or purifying the blood) or even *genealogists* (establishing the pedigree and legitimacy of elements of a language, and ridding it of ‘bastard’ words). All such images share the notion that specialist knowledge is required to make linguistic judgements, and all may be seen as relying, at a deeper level, on a more basic metaphor of, precisely, purity and integrity, the loss of which results in decay and degeneracy (see Thomas, 1991, p. 31). Thomas recognises that purism tends to occur during periods of ‘strong national sentiment’ (1991, p. 43), and, when such sentiment is associated with xenophobia (as it so frequently is), it almost invariably shares the same targets. The targets tend to belong to the culture that is deemed to pose a threat to the ‘home’ culture; what is most striking about early modern purism, as I have just suggested, is that the same

arguments, underpinned by the same metaphorical models, are used indiscriminately against a variety of targets from culture to culture.

One model that Thomas does not, however, discuss is that of linguistic borrowing as a form of economic exchange, and the role of the purist as an inhibitor of that process. While we need to wait until the end of the century and the reign of Henry IV to see mercantilism emerge as a clearly articulated national policy in France in the work of Antoine de Montchrestien, Barthélemy Laffemas and Turquet de Mayerne (see Desan, 1992, p. 11; Heller, 2003, pp. 212-18), its basic principles, namely that the wealth of the nation depended upon its reserves of capital in the form of gold or silver bullion, and that the government should adopt a protectionist attitude towards overseas trade, promoting local manufacture and exports (except for the export of bullion) and inhibiting imports by creating import tariffs and other trade barriers, were already evident earlier in the century. If words are seen as a form of linguistic ‘capital’, then it follows that the role of the purist is to protect them against replacement by imported foreign terms, which are almost universally viewed, in this period, as inherently unnecessary, unless referring to some undesirable characteristic seen as peculiar to the culture from which the word is being borrowed. Favourite examples of this category of pejorative terms derived from Italian, which Estienne and other purists are happy to admit, are ‘assassin’, ‘charlatan’ and ‘bouffon’ (see Clément, 1967, pp. 137, 344). The logical entailment of this metaphor, as John Cheke was of course aware, is that a nation that fails to keep a positive balance of linguistic payments risks bankruptcy.

3 Franco-Italian relations in the sixteenth century

In the context of sixteenth-century France, the perceived cultural (and hence linguistic) threat was that posed by Italy. When assessing the reasons for Italian linguistic and cultural influence in France in the sixteenth century, it is customary to focus attention upon the contacts between the two nations that occurred as a consequence of the Italian military adventures of successive French monarchs, starting with Charles VIII in 1494, and upon the presence of Italian émigrés at the royal court of France following the marriage of Catherine de Medici to the dauphin Henry in 1533. High-level contact between the intellectual elites of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is also privileged by those historians who foreground scholarly debates between French and Italian humanists, and the personal and professional competition for royal favour and financial patronage that fuelled them (see Simone, 1968, p. 86; Mann, 1971, p. 60; Sozzi, 1988, p. 100; Balsamo, 1992, pp. 32-33, 37).

What emerges less clearly in such accounts is the everyday animus that the presence of relatively well-heeled and relatively unassimilated Italian expatriate merchants and financiers in French urban communities appears to have generated. Such low-level contact, despite the often anecdotal nature of its historiographical record, is significant because of the investment made by Henri Estienne in its exploitation in the service of his polemical aims; it is into petty resentment and animosity of precisely this kind that he repeatedly attempts to tap through his choice of metaphors drawn from his readers' everyday experience of Italian migrants and settlers. Rather than restricting themselves to an audience of scholars and nobles, his vernacular works seem designed to strike a chord with the middle classes, whose resentment of the perceived excesses – linguistic and moral – of court life he seeks to mobilise as part of a more general

attack on Italian cultural influence. It is therefore worth analysing the types of low-level contact that would have defined and reinforced, for many of Estienne's readers, an overwhelmingly negative stereotype of the Italian 'invader'.

In his recent monograph *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France* (2003), Henry Heller gives a new account of anti-Italian feeling in sixteenth-century France and of the reasons for it. While high-level contact is initially privileged (Heller, 2003, p. 3), Heller goes on to trace the spread of anti-Italian sentiments from the educated elite to the merchant class and thence to the Huguenots and the nobility and, finally, to the Catholic population of major urban centres. He sees anti-Italianism not as a phenomenon restricted to intellectual and cultural debate, but, more fundamentally, as 'a conflict over money, markets, and political power' (Heller, 2003, p. 5); significantly, too, allegedly 'rootless' Italians could find themselves placed in the same xenophobic boat as Jews, whose financial dealings, like those of the Italian bankers and financiers, aroused suspicion and hostility in equal measure (2003, pp. 8-9). Indeed, during the Estates-General of Blois in 1576, the Third Estate aggressively condemned both Italian influence at court and the perceived stranglehold of prominent Italian courtiers and officials over the fiscal system, thus attempting to make the Italians responsible for the financial misery of the people (2003, p. 10). Huguenot publicists ascribed to the Italians responsibility for religious conflicts and economic crises. It is therefore little wonder that there was a significant market for anti-Italianism of the kind published by Henri Estienne at his press in Geneva, to which he had fled in 1551 to escape the persecution of the Catholic authorities in Paris; more detailed analysis of the forms taken by contemporary popular xenophobia will be instructive in helping to establish a picture of the preconceived attitudes and

prejudices that Estienne's careful choice of metaphors was designed to reinforce and radicalise.

4 The experiential basis for Estienne's metaphors of economic exchange

The growth of Italian influence in France in the latter part of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries may be ascribed both to the development of the financial markets and of trade more generally, and to the dynastic and cultural interests of successive French kings. Whereas Louis XI (1461-83) granted fiscal and commercial privileges to Italian merchants and financiers in order to cement the position of Lyon as the leading financial and commercial centre of western Europe, Louis XII (1498-1515) and Francis I (1515-47) invited Italian artists and intellectuals to their courts as a means both of asserting their awareness of the newest cultural and aesthetic trends, and of enhancing the desired links between the kingdom of France and its new (albeit temporary) Italian territories, whose conquest had been justified by dynastic connections and hereditary (or acquired) claims. During the early decades of the sixteenth century, the main concentration of expatriate Italian bankers and merchants, most of whom originated from Florence, Lucca, Milan and Genoa, was situated in Lyon. This milieu, as Heller reminds us (Heller, 2003, p. 34), was essentially diasporic in nature, with immigrants retaining a close connection to their homeland, and naturalisation relatively rare. This relative lack of integration of the immigrant population, despite their ostentatious and extravagant involvement in civic festivities, helps to account for a Calvinist backlash directed towards the Italians by such writers as Antoine Du Pinet. As Estienne was later to do, Du Pinet condemned in 1564 the extravagant sartorial fashions that he saw as imports from Italy; in addition to being

morally harmful, the Italian trade in silks and luxury goods was presented as drawing gold out of the kingdom as the French paid Italian merchants – who, of course, retained close family and financial connections with their home city – inflated prices for imported Italian goods (see Heller, 2003, p. 30).

In addition, Italian bankers, who offered temptingly high rates of interest to investors, were tainted by their association with the *Grand Parti*, a syndicate of mainly Lyonnese investors lending to the French crown with royal tax revenues as collateral, which notoriously collapsed in 1557, causing the ruin of numerous private individuals, including many widows and orphans (see Hauser, 1936, pp. 312-13; 316-17; Desan, 1992, p. 24). Indeed, Italian bankers are frequently presented as inherently unreliable, and prone to bankruptcy. The seriousness of the problem of bankruptcy in the period and its unpopularity with the Third Estate are indicated by the demands made at successive Estates-General in 1560 and 1576 that those found guilty of fraudulent bankruptcy should be ‘punis extraordinairement et capitalement’ (Hauser, 1936, pp. 318-19). Such accusations of peddling undesirable and unnecessary goods that served only to impoverish the French nation while playing fast and loose with French investors’ money, which came to dominate anti-Italian discourse in the latter part of the sixteenth century, and which have at their origin an essentially economic rivalry between French merchants and craftsmen and the expatriate Italian urban elite in cities such as Lyon, clearly drew upon the pervasive anti-Italianism to be found among France’s intellectual elite (see Heller, 2003, p. 35). Indeed, the commercial and cultural domains are frequently brought into contact in metaphorical explorations of analogies between them (see Desan, 1993, pp. 15-16): the French poet Joachim Du Bellay, for instance, asserts that the importation of Italian cultural ‘goods’ parallels

that of substandard Italian products, with the importers seeking to enrich themselves through the sale of inferior merchandise (see Du Bellay, 1908-85, vol. 6, pp. 115-18). The French humanist Etienne Dolet, complaining at Francis I's patronage of the Italian Giulio Camillo, remarks on the alleged French predilection for seeking out that which is foreign, novel and, typically, very expensive to the neglect of the things that they already have at home (Dolet, 1982, p. 100). Interestingly, Dolet's interest in the use of the vernacular, as attested by his treatises on translation and orthography, may be seen as part of an attempt to supplant the cultural hegemony of the Italian humanists through the development of a thriving market for French vernacular printed books, a market into which Estienne sought to break with his vernacular attacks on linguistic borrowing from Italian (see also Worth, 1988, pp. 12-13). Dolet and Estienne thus address themselves to the same readership: the educated (but not necessarily classically educated) middle classes, whose professional activities, be they mercantile, commercial, financial or administrative, brought them into contact – and, frequently, competition – with Italian immigrants. Indeed, from the 1540s and into the 1550s, the number of complaints about unfair competition by Italian merchants, who were granted monopolies in Lyon and then Paris, and who were perceived to be in unfair competition with French merchants, increased significantly. The frustrations of this class, experienced in commercial dealings and as a result of the fiscal exactions of the French crown (in which, as we will see, Italian financiers were frequently implicated), are addressed and amplified by Estienne in his choice of metaphors used to describe the Italian cultural influence, and, in particular, Italian influence – real and perceived – on the French language.

Henri Estienne's campaign, conducted in the French vernacular, against the perceived Italian influence on French society, manners and language began in earnest in the early 1560s, and culminated in the aftermath of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572. It is instructive to attempt to gauge public feeling towards the Italians in this period by means of a brief review of significant events immediately preceding and following the publication of Estienne's works. At the outbreak of the first war of religion in 1562, a minority of Huguenots seized control of the city of Lyon, established a Calvinist town council and consistory, and held it against royal forces until the early summer of 1563, only being expelled four years later (Heller, 2003, p. 29). This rebellion against royal (and Catholic) authority was presented as a service to the true interests of the king and an attempt to free him of the corrupting foreign influence of the Guise, compromised for many by their close relationship with the Spanish crown, and the papacy. Huguenot political nationalism at this stage thus defined itself, to a large extent, as a response to foreign forces that were themselves intent on disrupting the peace of the kingdom; within the city of Lyon and elsewhere, such sentiments found expression in hostility against the Italian population. At the same time, the perception that the French church was dominated by Italian prelates offended both Gallicans and Huguenots alike. The Estates-General of Orléans in 1560 had called for an investigation into the profligate dealings of Henry II's Italian financiers, whose brief, ironically, had been to raise, through borrowing (from Italians) and taxation (of the French people), the enormous sums needed to finance the king's military campaigns in Italy (Heller, 2003, p. 50). Indeed, the Huguenot Condé, in his *Protestation de Monseigneur le Prince de Condé* of 1568, attempted to justify the Huguenot rebellion of the 1560s by asserting that its chief aim had been to

persuade the king of France to call another Estates-General in order to relieve the people of the fiscal oppression of the Italians (Heller, 2003, p. 50).

This opposition to the heavy burden of taxation required to fund both the increasing extravagance of the royal court, with its insatiable appetite for credit, and foreign military adventures manifested itself also in Paris in the years preceding the Saint Bartholomew massacre. The Venetian ambassador at the court of France reported in 1569 that Italians had not been safe on the streets of Paris for two years (Heller, 2003, p. 80). A riot in Paris in June 1572 (two months before the massacre of Huguenots) had been directed against highly placed Italian courtiers and the Queen Mother herself, all of whom were accused of the blood libel traditionally directed against the Jewish population; this analogy between the Italians and the Jews in the popular consciousness, although, perhaps, initially surprising, was clearly rooted in the perception that both groups were engaged in usury and the exploitation of the common people. Further riots and attempted massacres of prominent Italians resident in Paris took place in 1575 and 1578, with students combining forces with commoners in the former (Heller, 2003, pp. 80-84). While the Parisian student population had a longstanding reputation for agitation and rowdiness, its involvement in such anti-Italian activities is significant, indicating that the educated classes were not exempt from the sort of knee-jerk xenophobia that could easily spill into violence against foreigners. Estienne's anti-Italian writings were in all likelihood pitched at a readership that was, in part at least, already radicalised and happy to have its existing prejudices reinforced and harnessed to a programme of more ambitious cultural contestation.

5. Estienne's metaphors for linguistic exchange

In making the case for the 'defence' of the French language against a perceived influx of words and other linguistic material borrowed from Italy, Henri Estienne consistently privileged, in his persuasive and satirical work, a range of commonplace metaphors that were evidently designed to appeal to such ostensibly self-evident concepts as the value of good health, 'purity' (as opposed to harmful adulteration), sound personal and domestic finances, and plain cooking. The choice of such metaphors was motivated, I would suggest, by two factors: first, congruence with the most salient aspects of perceived Italian dominance in financial and fiscal affairs, and influence on courtly fashion and manners, as set out above; and, secondly, a consideration of 'audience design', in other words, the attempt to tailor the metaphors used to the lived experience of the targeted readership (see Bell, 1984). The effectiveness of such commonplace metaphors may, I think, be explained most readily by reference to the notion of 'common ground', the contextual information shared by speaker/writer and listener/reader that enables the latter to decode metaphorical utterances accurately, even when the linguistic formulation of the metaphor does not appear to provide all the information needed for successful interpretation. Raymond Gibbs gives the example of a conversation about politics between two speakers of American English (Gibbs, 1994, pp. 113-14): if one refers to a mutual female acquaintance as an 'elephant', this serves to indicate that the acquaintance is a member of the Republican party (whose symbol is, of course, an elephant). I would suggest that, in later sixteenth-century France, use of metaphors playing on financial impropriety, extravagance of dress or disguise, immorality of manners and indigestibility of food all made an analogous appeal to the 'common ground' of a

French readership – not restricted to the persecuted Huguenot population – dissatisfied with the perceived political, financial and cultural influence of an Italian émigré group and ready to credit them with such vices. I will restrict myself in what follows to a consideration of one such set of metaphors, those dealing with financial practices and economic exchange.

In the preface to his *Traicté de la conformité du langage françois avec le grec* of 1565, Estienne sets out his ideological position in the linguistic debate and, through his choice of metaphors, situates that position in the lived experience of the readership (Estienne, 1853, pp. 17-46). Modern theoreticians of metaphor have noted the effectiveness of metaphor as a persuasive tool precisely because it is able to tap into and reinforce conventional modes of thought, to appeal to the already-known as a means of making sense of complex reality (see, for example, Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 157). Estienne, in a lengthy section of his preface devoted to a description of the kind of language that he will *not* be discussing in his treatise, sets out to appeal to the existing prejudices of his readers in respect of Italian influence on the sumptuary habits of French courtiers:

But, before I begin, I wish to warn my readers that I do not intend to refer to that gaudy form of the French language that changes its livery every day depending on how our friend the courtier or our friend the lawyer choose to dress it up. Nor will I be referring to the kind of French that is disguised, masked, affected, made up and confected according to the wishes of all those other people who are as obsessed with novelty in their speech as they are with novelty in their clothes. I shall leave to one side the French that is italianised

and hispanised. The reason for this is that this disguised French, by changing its dress, has at the same time lost (at least in part) the similarity that it used to display with the rich and beautiful Greek language. (My translation; original in Estienne, 1853, p. 20)

By deploying the metaphorical models of extravagant dress and disguise, Estienne makes an appeal both to a well established tradition of French anti-aulic satire (see Smith, 1966, pp. 51, 61, 84-85, 157) and, in particular, to Huguenot disapprobation of the perceived excesses of the French royal court, dominated (as popular opinion held) by the arch-Catholic faction around the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici. In the same way that frequent changes of ‘livery’ were seen as a symptom of the supposed moral degeneracy of the French court and of the financial profligacy of its courtiers (fuelled by loans from Italian financiers), supposedly unnecessary changes to the language, specifically the borrowing of words from the modern vernaculars, as opposed to Greek, Latin, and earlier states of the French language itself, are presented as inherently undesirable and, indeed, harmful to it, since they distort its ‘true’ nature. This notion of distortion, which relies for its effectiveness on metaphors of masking and their overwhelmingly negative connotations for a readership suspicious of lavish court entertainment and the figure of the Italian charlatan, has an additional ideological burden, as is made clear in Estienne’s reference to Greek: by masking the close linguistic relationship that Estienne (whose knowledge of Greek was unparalleled in the period) claimed to perceive between that language and French, Italian influence prevents French from assuming its rightful position in the hierarchy of languages as a close relative of Greek. No-one could argue, of course, that Italian was not closer to Latin than French was; Estienne’s aim is to circumvent this

difficulty by asserting, with copious if rather (to a modern eye) unconvincing examples, that French was far closer to Greek than Italian ever could be. Aside from the obvious prestige that could be acquired for French through such an argument, there is a deeper ideological basis for the comparison between French and Greek: the latter is characterised as lending words to all other languages and borrowing words from none (Estienne, 1853, p.19), thus fulfilling admirably the mercantilist conception of a perfect language. Ignoring the clear historical and cultural reasons for this state of affairs (he prefers to concentrate on Greek's facility in the creation of neologisms), Estienne chooses to associate linguistic prestige – or what he calls 'preeminence' – with what we might call a positive balance of payments in the international market. This conception is underpinned by a further important model, that of borrowing. In the light of the events I have just resumed, most notably the collapse of the *Grand Parti* of Lyon, and the well documented anti-Italian sentiment that they had engendered, Estienne's deployment of the metaphor of borrowing has an obvious political, as opposed to merely linguistic, resonance. The form in which he chooses to make the point, however, is clearly designed to appeal to his readers' everyday experience:

if we do have to borrow, why do we not reserve that honour for the two ancient languages, Greek and Latin, from which we already derive the greater part of our speech, rather than extend it to the modern vernaculars, which are, dare I say it, inferior to our own? [...] But we are like the sort of poor householder who, in order to save time, borrows things from his neighbours that he would have found at home if only he had bothered to look for them. (My translation; original in Estienne, 1853, pp. 21-22)

Borrowing implies an unequal relationship between debtor and creditor, with the latter in a position of strength, and, Estienne implies, all reasonable steps should be taken to avoid it; the French should seek to apply the same standards of thrift and prudent domestic management to their language as they do to their own households. The homely and apparently self-evident nature of these formulations belies the skill with which such commonplaces of everyday life (perceived, perhaps, in a more acute form in the context of the nascent mercantilism of later sixteenth-century France) are applied to an ideologically and confessionally loaded ‘defence’ of the French language against foreign influence. If Estienne’s warnings are not heeded, he asserts, then he fears that the French language, which has previously enjoyed such ‘vogue’ and ‘credit’, will be unable to pay back its creditors and will be obliged to ‘faire un tour de banqueroutier’ (Estienne, 1853, p. 32), or declare itself bankrupt: the solvency of the language depends on its ability to repay more loan words to the Italians than it has taken from them. (There is an unconscious – or, perhaps, deliberate? – irony in these lines: the words *vogue*, *credit* and *banqueroute* had all been borrowed from Italian.) This argument finds its logical culmination in Estienne’s *Précellence du langage françois* of 1579, in which he claims that, for each word that French has borrowed from Italian in the politically sensitive domain of military terms, it can adduce three or four that it has, at an earlier stage of its development, lent to that language (Estienne, 1896, p. 354).

5. Conclusion

Is it fair, then, to conclude that Henri Estienne is a linguistic mercantilist? He is certainly acutely conscious of the linguistic balance of payments, and uses it as a criterion for his judgement as to the relative merits of languages. He supports the enrichment of the vocabulary of French through the local manufacture of words, or at least the rediscovery of archaic terms that may usefully be reintroduced into general usage to plug a gap in the lexicon and thus remove the need for a foreign borrowing (see Desan, 1993, p. 110). But can we claim that he is successful in the creation of barriers to prevent borrowing in the first place? His explicitly stated wish that all foreign words be ‘banished’ from the language if they can find no-one to defend them had, as we might expect, no immediate impact. Indeed, as George Thomas reminds us, during the phase of ‘pre-standardisation’, linguistic purists ‘tend to act individually or in small, loosely organised groups. As a result, the puristic activity displays a high degree of idiosyncrasy which [militates] against its long-term impact’ (Thomas, 1991, p. 117). Four hundred years later, however, Estienne was hailed as a precursor by a new generation of French purists, chief among them René Etiemble, whose campaign against *le franglais* culminated in government legislation to inhibit the uptake of anglicisms (see Hornsby, 1998). While linguistic protectionism may be viewed as an enduring feature of the attitude of the French people towards its language, the attempt made in this essay to reconstruct, however partially, the common ground knowledge of Estienne’s sixteenth-century readers suggests that such historically determined contextual information is essential for a proper understanding of the effectiveness of metaphor use in specific instances of discourse.

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